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THE TOWER OF BABEL: HISTORY IN PICTURE

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For several months during the present year, thousands of Sunday schools will be studying the wonderful book of Genesis. To some the book will bring many difficult questions, but to all it can bring stirring and inspiring teaching as to God's dealings with humanity. Through it all run deep moral purpose, profound religious faith, a sense of the divine presence. However varied may be the interpretations given its record of early heroes and nations, these fundamental characteristics should never escape notice. This article by Dr. Stevens is an interesting attempt to show the historical significance of a portion of Genesis that hitherto has received chiefly critical treatment.

Vivisection by specialists in literary criticism has laid the book of Genesis apart in numerous fragments. It is alleged that the man responsible for the book, as it appears in the Bible, took these fragments in many cases from living creations of literature in his day and assembled them to suit himself. There was method in the compiler's operation, and the resulting literary whole is not a pile of unrelated members of various bodies. Critics have remarked the living unity of the form upon which they have worked. The book has an aim, and all the parts have their places to suit it. Says Driver: "The narrative of Genesis, though composite, is constructed upon a definite plan, and to the development of this plan the details that are incorporated from the different sources employed are throughout subservient."

Illustration of this fact may be found, I think, in the well-known story of the Tower of Babel.

It is not my purpose to detail what

has been thought of this story, and to repeat the generally accepted interpretation; such work would be superfluous here. I have rather to present an explanation which has at least one claim for a hearing: it is new, and itself seeks criticism.

I

Every student will acknowledge that the Book of Genesis was written at a time when history, in the scientific sense of the term, had not yet come to be. Modern writers, who claim to be guided by the canons of scientific method, look back to the Greek Thucydides as the first real road-breaker in their branch of science. Herodotus, the so-called "father of history," was only a narrative writer, with a literary charm in story-telling that makes his work live; he studied to write no dull page, but the most lively lines may be misleading; he knew what interested him, and how to make the account interesting to others, but he did not know how to measure and to weigh so

as to present facts with exactness; he heard and wrote with enthusiasm rather than with discrimination. But Thucydides was the father of the scientific method. He learned to consider and criticize facts, with calm, cool search for the truth. "He did not take up his pen to celebrate; his aim was to understand, to observe critically," not to provide mere "good reading," "but to construct a record which shall be permanently valuable because it is true." This severely critical method it is the effort of our modern historians to apply, though at the same time they do not disdain to make their writings readable; they would combine accuracy with style, "fame's great antiseptic." How far they have succeeded there still is no small room to question; not so much in regard to literary charm, for in that many have beyond doubt achieved large success; but in regard to scientific exactness, for estimates of that differ widely. But millenniums before the birth of our modern historical method came the dawn of history. Facts began to be put down in a shape that would secure their transmission. Venerable pyramids, hoary monuments on which the age-long play of the chisels of wind and weather has cut away many of the marks of men's tools, ancient inscriptions in strange characters made more grotesque by the steady licking of the tongue of time, testify to the desire of men that their memorials should stand when they themselves no longer stood among men.

But the idea of exact statement, as literally true in every line and word as a modern scientist's description of the development of a frog from the cleavage of the single protoplasmic

cell to the multicellular organisms of the full-grown creature with its highly specialized parts, was not born a twin with the idea of celebrating the fame of doers and deeds. The oldest written means of expression of which we have knowledge were pictorial, the hieroglyphs of Egypt and the ideographs of Babylonia. In reducing ideas to written language, men put them in the form of pictures. Men thought in pictures; their conception of things was in the shape of the appeal things made to their imagination. Nature and the doings of men unfolded before them like a great drama; and they sat before the stage, taking down their impressions, their pictures of what they saw. What was more natural than that their earlier compositions should have the pictorial, rather than the baldly, exactly literal, as their characteristic? So among the earliest records of the past are myths and legends, the narratives of folk-lore, celebrations in verse of popular themes, rising from the grade of the ballads and tales recited by a wandering minstrel mid applause of laughter and tears from some village group, to the lofty degree of an epic that has conquered the admiration of the world. To be sure, these are not records sifted and refined by the critical processes of modern historiography. They are records of the past, not in black and white prose literalness, but in poetic figure and color. If we can only succeed in dissolving out the poetic colors, we may arrive at the underlying basis of fact, though it is not always easy to do this. Pictures are the myth and legend, but not wholly woven out of stuff more tenuous than the gauzy web of a comet's tail; pictures having meaning and illustrating historical fact.

So it is with this Bible story of Babel. It may not be history written according to strict modern methods, but it is a picture of historical facts, such as ancient writers, and especially some Old Testament writers, knew how to make. Readers of the Bible cannot fail to be impressed with the fondness shown for pictorial statements, and great dexterity in composition and use of them. "Poetry," says a writer in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "is the mother-tongue of the human race." Forms and vocabulary of that language men who gave us the Bible knew well, not as an acquisition from foreigners, but as something native to the soil from which they themselves had sprung. Naturally, when they would narrate the story of the past or teach lessons to the present, they used poetry as the supreme vehicle. Vividly they had seen the historical occurrence, deeply they had thrilled to the touch of the moral, spiritual truth, and no mere colorless prose, however exact in its terms, could convey for them expression of the thrill and the burst of light. Therefore it is that the prose narrative of the Book of Judges is interrupted to give space for that majestic lyric, the Song of Deborah; and into the narrative of the Exodus is inserted the ode of triumph over the Egyptian host which the hand of Jehovah had discomfited. In these two cases, the story already told in prose is retold in poetry. In like manner, here in the case of the story of Babel, the poetical picture of facts is preceded, as we shall see, by a simple prose statement that covers partially the same ground. We may not call it a poem, but it is poetic in conception and phraseology; it is history seen through a poet's eyes.

II

My question is of the meaning of this story in its present shape and setting. Scholars have thought that here is a blending of two folk-tales, or of two forms of the same tradition. With that I have nothing to do. In studying Shakespeare, I care not so much to know what was the source of his material and what significance the material had in its original matrix, as to know the meaning the material holds in the shape and place the hands of Shakespeare have given it. So I am occupied with the meaning of this story in its connections in Genesis.

Of what is it a description? Look at the familiar sentences.

The story tells us that the whole earth, or land, or country, was of one language, of one vocabulary. And it came to pass that men in their wanderings came from the east into the plain of Shinar, and there settled down. They took the best material for building the neighborhood afforded, clay molded into bricks, hardened in the kiln, and bitumen which served as cement. Their purpose is defined: "Let us build a city and a tower, whose top shall be to heaven, and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

The idea, then, is that of construction and development on the plain of Shinar, or, as we call it, Babylonia; the erection of a great center of population and power, the establishment of security, greatness, and glory through the unifying of mankind; men are to be made and held a unit through the construction there in Babylonia. The lofty tower, reaching up till it would seem to touch the very heavens, would

symbolize impressively the dwelling-place of might, the city which has entrance to the very things of God, and is the appropriate center of men. It is a scheme of greatness and glory depending for its fulfilment upon the ability of the schemers to mold men into a unit according to their mind.

The plan failed. Why? Because of the confusion of tongues.

God, so the story tells us, came down and looked upon the work and recognized that there were possibilities of the fulfilment of the plan, if men had all one language, and so he confounded their speech. The result was the scattering of men and the collapse of the scheme; "they left off building the city." Therefore, the city got a name, Babel, from the confusion of tongues, and instead of being a center of a unit, it was marked as the center of separation.

The dress of the narrative is pictorial, poetic, dramatic. Mark the descent of God to see the work, and his speech announcing his purpose to interfere. But beneath the poetic dress, the great facts outlined would seem to be historical enough. To my mind, the great point in the story would appear to be, not the confusion of tongues, but the failure of the builders' plan; the confusion of tongues was only the occasion of the failure.

Account of this scheme and its downfall is written elsewhere upon the pages of recognized history. We have here a word-picture, in brief, poetic phrase, of the rise, progress, and failure of the idea of empire in Babylonia. There it was sought to build a city, Babylon, which should be the metropolis, queen of peoples; men should be resolved into a unit, all of them acknowledging Baby-

lonian supremacy, and bringing their glory and honor into the capital. Some success was won. Babylon's power was felt afar. The way was in part prepared for her. I should not take the opening statement of the Bible tale as a witness to the fact that the Babylonian language had already become *lingua franca*, the language of commercial and diplomatic intercourse, before the emergence of Babylon into pre-eminence among the sisterhood of city-states in South Babylonia. But it is a fact that already before Babylon came to the leadership, the touch of Babylonian culture through trade and politics had been widely felt, and the new queen of cities had thus advantages ready to her hand. None the less, the dream and purpose of empire were vain. That ship of hope and endeavor came to wreck on the rock of the differences in peoples. It was hard, it was impossible for Babylon to mold into one coherent whole the peoples around her, so that they should not be scattered, dissociated, going their separate ways according to their own minds. She could not reconcile the differences between them and herself, differences which appeared outwardly in striking show in the language.

A language has connected with it the spirit, the genius of a people, their very mind and heart. When you have persons speaking the same language, you have evidence of the existence of some great essentials of unity. Until we get on the platform of understanding, through our use in common of some means of communication, we are aliens one to another. The immigrants we call foreigners are very much foreigners to us till by their use of our own speech they have made it evident that they have

grasped and taken into themselves the idea and spirit of Americanism. We have been able to melt the heterogeneous foreign elements into the common substance of our people, because we have succeeded so far in breaking up the little Hungaries and Russias and Italies through education of the masses in our language and in our national mind, manners, customs, and views. So the United States of America has thus far maintained itself, and shows today an astonishing homogeneity; while a United States of Europe, several times attempted, as Emil Reich points out, has never been an accomplished fact, and the process of national differentiation has rather grown more intense of late.

So the Babylonian scheme of unifying the peoples failed. Instead of understanding, harmony, unity, there was disagreement, discord, disunion. Babylon became a scene of Babel and of separation.

Much has been made of the supposed mistake which the story makes in connection with the name of the city. The name, as it appears in Assyrian inscriptions, is really *bāb ili*, i.e., "Gate of God," or perhaps "gate of the gods." But in the story we read "therefore is its name called Babel, because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth"; that is, the name is explained as derived from a stem *bal* which means "to confuse," an instance, we are told, of popular etymology making such an error as we might expect in one of these old mythical, folk-lore tales. Now "an etymology, like a horse, may be a vain thing for safety, and carries our faith on many a breakneck journey into the land of speculation." But, let me add, was the writer of the story

as we have it, so unconscious of the real meaning of the name of the city? From the language he uses, we may reasonably conclude that he was not. Notice again the words in which he reports the purpose of the builders: "Let us build us a city, and a tower whose top shall be to heaven, and let us make us a name." The name to which they aspired was to be in keeping with the city and the lofty tower, reaching to heaven, a city that should be the very gate of the glory and greatness of the gods. Does it require so great a stretch of credulity to believe that, underlying the poetic description of the city with its heaven-piercing tower, is a consciousness, on the part of the author, of the real significance of the name which the builders hoped to make good? But they did not make good, says the story. Instead of erecting a "gate of God," they made a Babel, a scene of confusion and failure. In short, what it seems we have here is not an etymology born of ignorance, but a punning etymology, in sharp derision of the scheme of glory and empire that fell through.

As it seems to me, this story is a sweeping pictorial review of the events of centuries: Babylon's rise to the position of the chief city-state of Mesopotamia, uniting all the other city-states of the region, and extending her influence, political, commercial, cultural, far and wide so effectively that her language remained, as we know, the speech of diplomacy even when her political power was waning, the big plan of glory and the unfinished column of achievement—all this is strikingly pictured in the few lines of the ancient record.